

Senator Lisa Murkowski
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Impressions from Iraq

I had the opportunity to travel to Iraq this past weekend with three of my Senate colleagues and visit with U.S. and Iraqi military and political leaders as well as a number of troops from Alaska. Our travel took us to Baghdad and Fallujah in Anbar Province. This was my first visit to Iraq and I used the trip to get a better feeling for conditions on the ground and the effects of the initial stages of our increased troop presence. I wanted to take this opportunity to share with you some of my impressions from Iraq.

Under the Baghdad Security Plan, or the “surge” as it has come to be known, there appears to be a leveling, if not decline, in the overall violence in Baghdad. It is much too early, however, to judge the success of the plan. We will not have a fuller picture of the plan’s achievements until all of the troops have been put in place in late-Spring.

When the President first announced his intent to temporarily increase the number of forces in Iraq I was skeptical that the results would be any different from previous troop increases. At the time, I asked every Administration and military official I met with how different results would be achieved and I continued that line of questioning in my meetings in Iraq. The response: Iraq’s political and military leaders are showing a level of commitment to bringing security to Baghdad that has not been there before.

More Iraqi troops have been brought into Baghdad from other parts of the country – a seemingly common-sense course of action to us, but a monumental step forward for Iraq. In the past, getting an Iraqi unit to deploy outside of their home area was not possible. The loyalty of the troops was to the local leader and these leaders were not inclined to lose influence over these forces. Now, however, the ability to shift troops around the country shows that it is becoming a national army, not just a group of local militias. The soldiers are beginning to identify themselves as Iraqi first, and Sunni, Shiite, or Kurd second.

The commitment was also demonstrated by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki’s March 13 visit to Ramadi in Sunni-dominated Anbar Province to meet with local tribal sheiks. Despite it being just a short helicopter ride away, the visit was Maliki’s first official trip to Anbar Province since he became Prime Minister and was intended to demonstrate unity with the Sunni leaders in that area. His visit has been hailed as an historic moment and hopefully one that will help in the national reconciliation process.

It is also important to understand the nature of the violence in Baghdad and recognize that it is not representative across the country. The sectarian violence that dominates the news in the capitol city is not as prevalent in Anbar Province. The violence in Anbar comes in the form of al-Qaeda operatives attacking Sunnis as a way to intimidate the local leaders into providing base support. As an example, the day before we arrived in Fallujah, chlorine gas attacks left 350 people in the hospital. The attacks weren’t against

U.S. forces, but targeted the local population. It is this form of terror and intimidation that al-Qaeda is employing to retain a base of operations in Anbar Province.

But we are starting to see these terror attacks backfire. It was stressed to me that there is not an individual or family in Anbar Province who has not been impacted in some manner by the al-Qaeda attacks. Local sheiks, at great risk to themselves and their families, are starting to fight back. In my view, it will not be long before even more local sheiks place the interests of their communities above the interests of al-Qaeda. Prime Minister Maliki's visit was an important event to show the sheiks that there is an alternative partner to al-Qaeda.

The military surge has been the subject of intense discussion and reporting, but as Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno, Commanding General of the Multi-National Corps-Iraq, reminded us, to bring stability to the region we also must focus on the civilian side of operations – there needs to be a surge of technocrats, particularly in the judicial and treasury fields. Iraq's judicial capability is extremely limited at this time and woefully inadequate for the current conditions. As Iraqi military and police forces detain insurgents and other criminals, a transparent process needs to be in place for a fair hearing. Without a set process, and without the ability to try suspects, those detained are released back into the public and the cycle of criminal action will continue.

On the financial side, the Iraqi government is currently in the process of developing their operating budget. They are also looking to enact a hydrocarbon bill for the distribution of oil revenue to each province. Yet, even as these revenue distribution provisions are moving forward, Iraq does not have the ability to distribute the funds across the nation. Iraq does not have land-lines for telecommunications. The ability to transmit data communications is non-existent. Wire transfers between banks are not possible. Soldiers are paid in cash and must travel home every few weeks in order to get that money to their families. There are no ATMs for Iraqis to use. Like the judicial situation, this is an issue area that needs to be addressed in the near future before funds are to be distributed. The United States can play a key role in providing Iraq with assistance toward that end.

Throughout our trip, I had the opportunity to sit down with men and women from Alaska who are serving in the area; from places like Anchorage, Fairbanks, Seward, Soldotna, Eagle River, Slana, and Wasilla. I could not be more proud of these Alaskans and the families who support them. Their willingness to serve our nation and the manner in which they conduct themselves makes them all heroes. It was humbling to hear them describe their day-to-day tasks. They are truly an inspiration. To an individual, they were intent on carrying out their mission. They simply asked that we in Congress allow them to do so, and provide them with the support they need – the equipment and financing to fulfill their task. That is a request I take to heart and one I will strive to uphold.